

# Panhandle Health District

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## Fitness Program Helps Prevent Falls

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**Hayden**—Jan Mittleider knew 30 years ago that older adults would benefit from regular exercise. The College of Southern Idaho health and physical education professor organized guided walks around Twin Falls. Older residents flocked to join her.

Three years ago, the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare also recognized the need to strengthen hearts and reduce the number of crippling falls among the state's oldest citizens. Idaho residents, primarily older adults, were falling at twice the national rate.

Health and Welfare turned for guidance to Terry-Ann Spitzer Gibson, an associate professor at Boise State University who had researched water aerobics and strength training in older adults. Terry-Ann teamed with Jan to build an Idaho-style exercise curriculum designed for seniors—Fit and Fall Proof.

In the last two years, the program has swept the state and earned raves and rock-solid loyalty from seniors. It has strengthened hundreds of older residents physically, bolstered them emotionally and multiplied their social connections for greater security.

"These groups get very close, support each other," says Joanna Adams, program manager of Fit and Fall Proof in the Panhandle Health District (PHD). "They check on each other when they're gone. The social support was a bonus we didn't anticipate."

Jan and Terry-Ann designed an exercise program that anyone can lead after a day of training. That was the point.

"We wanted retired people who could be empowered to lead classes," Jan says. "We don't have qualified teachers in our small communities, and we want this program in every area."

In PHD, which serves the five northern counties, Joanna asked the Retired Senior Volunteer Program to recruit potential Fit and Fall Proof group leaders. Jan and Terry-Ann trained the first 16 volunteers and Joanna helped them find free and safe sites—churches, senior centers, assisted living centers, community centers—for their classes.

PHD recruited the first participants, and the program blossomed after that from word of mouth alone. The classes provided low to moderate intensity exercises designed to reduce the risk of falls and improve mobility, balance and strength.

Participants gently stretched calves and reached their arms to the sky. They pushed their feet against elastic bands and balanced on one foot. They sat and stood and sat and stood and kept water bottles within quick reach.

But the classes offered much more than exercise.

One participant lost 15 pounds and was able to quit taking blood pressure medicine. Another saw her bone density improve 15 percent during her time in Fit and Fall Proof. The program helped one woman regain enough walking strength and confidence to start traveling again. One participant used the program's breathing exercises to help with stress relief during her recovery from surgery.

Participants made new friends. They met for other activities. They had parties and barbecues when the class ended for a few weeks.

"Research shows that people in a social environment function better," Terry-Ann says. "People wanted to carry on for social reasons, but we couldn't expect trainers to continue indefinitely."

Not only did participants want year-round classes, they invited their friends. Demand for classes quickly outdistanced the number of trainers available.

“We have 40 class leaders trained in five counties and 21 class sites,” Joanna says. “I tried to cut back, but there’s just a lot of enthusiasm out there.”

The classes are free and offered through the state’s seven health districts, which supply elastic bands, music and exercise sites. About 300 people participated in PHD’s classes. Joanna interviews and measures the skills of every participant, a task she tries to repeat quarterly.

This year she added a research element to her responsibilities. Joanna is studying three groups to document the benefits of the Fit and Fall Proof program. She’ll send the results to Boise State University to supply data for an evidence-based program.

Program participants need no documentation. At a recent Fit and Fall Proof class in Spirit Lake, about 15 women laughed and teased each other as they marched, stretched and bent.

“They don’t like to miss class,” said Bernae Linderman, who leads the class with four other women. “They’re faithful and they spread the word. That’s why we have five class leaders—so we never have to cancel a class.”

Fit and Fall Proof is so popular that new class leaders are always needed. PHD will hold a leader training in October. It’s one full day at the health district office at 8500 N. Atlas in Hayden. The training is free. To register, call 415-5144.